

the accident and began picking up 'heads and other body parts of the thirty-two victims.' He described himself as 'a traditional healer.' Villagers who had heard the crash and come to gape asked him what he was doing. 'The man explained that he had cast a spell the previous day for the accident to happen, so that he could get body parts to use for his treatments.'

Hearing this, the villagers beat him to death on the spot.

We arrived at the town of Tukuyu. Everyone got out of the minibuses – seventeen people, big and small. The driver said, 'We go no farther.'

I was glad to get out of this death trap. I found Tukuyu on my map. 'Meesta. Meesta. You want taxi?' The usual punks, two of them in a battered car. We agreed on a price to cross the border. 'We take you to Karonga.' That seemed so perfect it made me doubtful. We drove thirty miles in silence. Near the border, a scene of disorder and mud, more fruit sellers, people in shanties, the punks pulled off the road (as I had guessed they might), and demanded more money. 'We need to buy petrol.'

'Let's discuss it over there,' I said. I got out and started walking.

They sauntered after me, they waited while I got my passport stamped at the Tanzanian border post, they demanded more money. The rain let up, while I walked down the road towards the Malawian side, followed by urchins. I suppose I should have felt dismayed – it was late in the day, I was being pestered by kids and money changers and being shouted at by the punks in the taxi who had put the squeeze on me.

But I was happy. Mbeya was behind me, I had not gotten stuck in Tukuyu and I had circumvented the curse of *There are bad people there*. The border ahead looked lovely. I could see beyond a range of mountains the Republic of Malawi, a much flatter landscape in the distance. The African boys were still pestering me, but I picked up my pace and walked past the final gate, one they could not cross, leaving them behind, clinging to the fence. Just before dusk, the sun came out, and flashed – a whole gold bar pressed against the earth – and then liquefied and slipped, and I followed the last of the light into Malawi.

14 *Through the Outposts of the Plateau*

I crossed the border, three or four footsteps, striding into a different country, glad to be home again in slap-happy Malawi, land of dusty roads and even dustier faces, eighth poorest country in the world. The amount you paid for one meal in a good American restaurant, a single Malawian earned in an entire year. Here in Malawi, I had spent my two Peace Corps years trying to be a teacher in a schoolhouse at the foot of a hill in the southern province. Here, also, I had encountered my first dictator, had my first dose of the clap, and had a gun shoved in my face by an idiot soldier enraged by my color – three somewhat related events that inspired in me feelings of fear and disgust. But I had been happy here too, and perhaps for similar reasons, since the horror of near-death experiences can swell our capacity for love and fill us with a zest for life.

Malawi time was an hour earlier than Tanzania, yet it was night at the border. No one else was immigrating. I was alone in the office, a small building on the dark road leading into a forest. All these elements created the strong impression that I was entering the country by the back door.

I greeted the officials in their own language, using the polite form of address, the formal 'you,' and filled out my application form. Under 'Occupation' I wrote 'Teacher,' though I wanted to write, 'Provocateur.' I paid my visa fee, and got my passport stamped. I was heading out the door, into the country itself, when a small man sitting at a bare wooden table said, 'Yellow fever certificate, please.'

Amazingly, I had one. I handed it over.

'Out of date,' the man said. 'It expired last year. Good for ten years only.'

'I didn't know that.'

'You should read the certificate.' The tiny nondescript man, speaking to me sharply in this way, acquired distinct features – became a skinny,

cold-eyed, rat-faced predator, in a sweaty shirt, with flecks of dirty lint in his hair. 'Also, your vaccination is out of date.'

'Do you have yellow fever in Karonga? Because that's where I'm going.'

'Yes, we have yellow fever,' he said turning his fangy face on me. 'We have cholera. We have smallpox. We have malaria. Polio, too. We have many illnesses.'

'*Ntenda kwambiri. Pepani!*' I said, Lots of sickness. Sorry!

'This is very serious. Come with me.'

As soon as he uttered them, I knew that the actual meaning of these words was, *Bribe me*. He believed he had the advantage: the border had just closed, the office was empty except for a few officers, the road was dark, and we were at the remotest, northernmost point of this elongated country. The first time I had entered the country, in December 1963, the African immigration officer had smiled and welcomed me and thanked me in advance for being a teacher in Malawi.

'In here,' the rat-faced man said, ordering me. He opened the door to a small shabby office. The building was so badly made, so temporary looking, that the walls did not reach to the ceiling. I could hear mutterings from other rooms. I sat on a plastic chair, while he took his place behind a desk, under a portrait of the president of Malawi, Mr Muluji, a gap-toothed fatty in glasses. This politician's first act in office was to put his unappealing face on all the national currency, his chubby profile on coins, full face on the notes. The act had since been rescinded but the money still circulated, and his intimidating portrait hung on every shop wall in the country. One of his objections to his predecessor in office was that the man had created a cult of personality. Smiling at the bribe-minded man behind the desk, I thought, You will get nothing from me, buster.

'This is very serious,' he said, fingering an official form that was perhaps a deportation order.

'I will get a revaccination in Karonga. Also a yellow fever shot.'

'Not possible in Karonga. There is no hospital.'

'In Lilongwe, then.'

'The prophylaxis, so to say, does not take effect for ten days. What if you fell ill? That would be serious.'

I hated his pomposity, and every time he used the word 'serious,' it sounded insistently extortionate. I decided not to speak to him in English.

'*Ndithu, bambo. Ndadwala ndikupita ku chipatala,*' I said. Definitely, sir. If I got sick I would go to the hospital.

He said, 'I would be very sorry if you fell ill.'

'*Pepani, pepani sapolitsa chironda.*' It was an old Malawi saw: 'Saying "Sorry, sorry" doesn't heal the wound.'

He didn't react to that jape. He said, 'The road is very bad because of rain. You might not reach up to Lilongwe for many days.'

'*Mvula! Matope! Nzeru za kale, anthu anasema, "Wailala mvula, malila matope!"*' – 'Rain! Mud! Long ago, the wisdom was, "Ask for rain and you're asking for mud!"'

My yakking clearly irritated him, but he was still delaying me and not dissuaded from circling around a bribery demand. Now he dangled my passport at me. 'You must understand this is serious. Your certificate is out of date. It has failed.'

'Like you'd say of a bow. *Uta wabwino wanga wagwa!*' – My good bow has failed.

Finishing this alliteration, for it was a magnificently alliterative language, I heard an African yodeling in Chichewa from the other side of the transom, 'Eh! Eh! What is this I hear? A white man speaking this language. Where is this white man?'

The door opened and a stout bald man in a policeman's uniform entered, laughing and reaching to shake my hand. We exchanged polite greetings in Chichewa, he asked me my name, my country, and welcomed me.

'I want to go to America,' he said in his language, and then, 'Where did you learn to speak Chichewa?'

'I was a teacher a long time ago at Soche Hill.'

'Please, be a teacher again here. We need you, father.'

While the policeman clutched my hand in his two hands, to show respect, I said, 'I want to help. But I have a problem.'

'What is the problem?' he said, raising his voice and leaning to look at the small scruffy man at the desk.

But the scruffy man's head was down and he was writing fast,

completing the form he had waved at me. He said in a breathless furtive way, 'I am allowing you entry on humanitarian grounds.'

The policeman accompanied me to the gate, saying, 'Did you have a problem in there?'

I reminded him of another bit of Malawi wisdom, '*Matako alaabili tabuli kucumbana*.' – Two buttocks cannot avoid friction.

'You must stay,' he said, laughing. 'Our schools are bad these days. We want teachers.'

'I am not a teacher now. I am a *mlendo*.' It was a nice all-purpose word meaning traveler, wanderer, stranger, guest.

I found a minibus parked on the dark road near some fruit and drink stalls. The vehicle reeked of diesel oil and chicken blood in the evening heat, and was half-filled with passengers. I stood near it, listening to the racket of the nighttime insects. The market was ramshackle and very dirty, run by grannies and ragged boys. A man was roasting corncobs on a smoky fire. A short distance away, glowing in moonlight, was a huge cactus like a saguaro with upraised arms.

'When is this bus going to Karonga?' I asked.

'We don't know.'

I did not mind. I was forgiving and patient, because I was where I wanted to be. I was not spooked by the darkness and this empty road, the disorderly market, the rotten garbage, the blowing smoke, the rags, the stinks; I was reassured. For one thing, it seemed that nothing had changed: the simplest country I had ever known was still simple.

After a while, the driver got in, and after many tries with the key and several denunciations, he started the engine, and off we went.

In the fifty miles to Karonga in the battered bus, I made a mental list, headed, 'You Know You're in Malawi When ...'

the first seven shops you pass are coffin-makers;

an old man on the road is wearing a fur-trimmed woman's pink housecoat from the 1950's;

the rear rack on a bike is stacked with ten uncured cow hides;

a roadblock is a bamboo pole across two barrels and the official manning it is wearing a T-shirt lettered *Winnipeg Blue Bombers*;

two policemen stop your minibus for no reason and at gunpoint

force the fourteen passengers to pile out in the dark (and they looked at my passport for quite a long time);

the lovely smooth tarred road abruptly becomes a rutted muddy track that is barely passable;

people start sentences with, 'But we are suffering, sir;'

people say, apropos of nothing, 'The day the old woman disappears is when the hyena shits gray hair;'

on the day the Minister of Finance announces his National Austerity Plan, it is revealed that thirty-eight Mercedes-Benzes have just

been ordered from Germany.

In the cool wet air, over muddy broken roads, past huts and hovels lit by kerosene lamps, we traveled slowly, stopped by armed policemen at some roadblocks and by insolent youths at others. We were in darkness. In some places, people were squatting in the road, awaiting any vehicle to take them into Karonga. This seemed the height of desperation, because it was after eight at night, two hours after sunset, and hardly anyone drove at night. But we picked them up and they got in blinking, pulling sacks and children after them.

The teenager collecting the fares had been calling me *mzungu* since the border. At first I ignored him, because it was insulting, and beneath my notice. But the punk kept it up, asking me in Chichewa, 'White man, where are you going?'

The correct form of address was, '*bambo*' (father), or '*bwana*' (sir), or even '*achimwene*' (brother). In the past, no Malawian would have dreamed of speaking to a stranger in such a rude way.

Finally, when he persisted – this was in the darkness of the crowded smelly minibus on the rutted road – I faced him and said, 'Do you want me to call you "dark man"? (*muntu muda* – the adjective covered dark, black, brown and blue).

He just went silent and sulked. The minibus labored onward. I was still facing him.

'*Kodi. Dzina lanu ndani?*' Excuse me. What's your name?

'Simon,' he said.

'Good. Don't call me "white man" and I won't call you "dark man." My name is Paul.'

'Mr Paul, where are you going?' he said in a chastened voice. But I had no idea where I was going. We entered the small shadowy town, where the main street was in even worse condition than the road from the border – deep ruts, potholes and wide mud puddles. The light of some fluorescent bulbs that served as street lamps showed that most of the shops were shut.

'Drop me at the hotel,' I said, assuming there was a hotel.

From the ripe smell and the rising damp I knew we were headed to the lakeshore, and there they dropped me at a bleak set of buildings, made of cinderblocks, with a sign saying Marina Hotel. As soon as I got out of the vehicle, rain began to fall, not heavy but spattery, like a noisy warning, smacking the big leaves of the trees overhead and making a crashing sound on the lake.

I was led to a room in a thatch-roofed hut that was full of mosquitoes. This was one of the 'deluxe suites,' fifteen dollars a night, including breakfast. I put down my bag, sprayed myself with insect repellent, and went to find some food. I could not remember whether I had eaten anything that day – perhaps some bananas, maybe some peanuts. In Tanzania as in Ethiopia, the people looked so desperate I had no appetite.

But there was a restaurant and bar at the Marina, and though it was a stormy night there was loud music and drunken Malawians, some of them singing, others staggering, perhaps dancing. The rain came down hard, lashing the awnings, wetting the tables, flooding the driveway. Two men with the hardy sunburned look of safari guides shoved out a chair and asked me to join them.

One said, 'This rain is nothing. Last night was a torrent. It was the hardest rain I've ever seen in my life.'

He was raising his voice to be heard over the falling rain.

'What are you doing here?'

'Driving to Kenya,' the other man said. 'You alone?'

'Yes. I just came from the border,' I said. 'Actually, I'm on my way from Cairo. I passed through Kenya. You know Moyale?'

The younger man said, 'I was born in Kenya and lived there my whole life and I've never been to Moyale.'

That made me feel as though I had accomplished something. And

I was right about their having the look of safari guides, because they ran an upmarket safari company, Royal African Safaris. The name called to mind the sort of luxury safari where the clients wore pith helmets and khakis and camped in elegant tents by waterholes in the bush, a different Africa from the one I traveled through.

The younger man was David Penrose, his partner – huge and weather-beaten and white-haired – was Jonny Baxendale. They both looked jovial and dauntless and reliable. We drank beer and ate fish and chips, as the rain grew louder. They had worked on the film *Out of Africa*. David lived in Nanyuki, Jonny in Karen, which he said was safe now: 'We chased the rascals out.' They admitted that Nairobi was in deep decline, people moving to the outskirts. 'But our business is in the bush.'

They were driving north, having just bought a new Land-Rover in South Africa. They had driven through Zimbabwe and Zambia.

'You're going to like South Africa. Cape Town is great,' David said. 'You'd think you were in Europe.'

'What do you make of Malawi?' I asked.

'It's okay,' Jonny said. 'We've just come over the plateau. It's dead empty. There's some game. It's Africa, all right.'

As we talked and drank beer, the wind became stronger and drove the rain on to the veranda where we were sitting. We moved farther in, and were preparing to go inside when with an uprush of wind and drenching rain the lights went out, the music stopped, the Africans began shouting. We sat in the howling gale in complete darkness.

'We've got to make an early start,' David said, after a while, standing up.

We shook hands and parted. The bartender gave me a lantern and pointed me in the direction of my hut.

The hut interior was damp and buggy but there was a mosquito net knotted over the bed. I undid it and tucked it in and slipped inside, and there I lay, listening to the radio – news of an attempted coup in the capital, Lilongwe. This might have been alarming, but I guessed it was the usual ruse, a pretext to arrest members of the opposition and an inspiration for the police to squeeze travelers at roadblocks.

Twiddling knobs, I found a station playing country music of a sort

that had always been popular in Malawi – Jim Reeves, Hank Williams and Flatt and Scruggs, good old songs. But then a preacher came on and began talking about sinners and said, 'Welcome to World Harvest Radio, Christian country music.' I was like the Mexican heathens in the Paul Bowles short story 'Pastor Dow at Tacaté,' who are so bemused by the pastor playing 'Fascinatin' Rhythm' on his wind-up record-player in the chapel that they stick around for the sermon.

So I switched off the radio and I lay in the dark, listening to the rain and marveling that I had made it to Malawi alone on the long safari. I was eager to spend my big birthday here, and even had a plan. I had asked the US Embassies in Uganda and Kenya to email the US Embassy in Lilongwe, saying that I was available to speak at any school or college in the country, or to meet aspiring African writers. I would also visit my old school, maybe bring some textbooks, and I would volunteer to spend a week teaching, to show my gratitude to Malawi after so many years: the long-lost son returning to give something back on his birthday. I wanted to signify my return in some way, with a gesture.

The morning in Karonga was golden after the rain, with sharp colors – the glittering lake, the pure blue sky without a scrap of cloud, the thick green foliage, the black mud. Some trees still dripped. The heat and dampness were heavy against my body. A delivery man at the hotel gave me a lift back to the main road, so that I could look for a ride south.

Karonga's main street was a shock to me. The shops that had been in darkness, that I had taken to be shut the night before, were hollow-eyed and abandoned. This was the first big difference I noticed – the closed-down shops, which had been Indian shops. The second were the coffin-makers. Coffin-making in Africa is a visible outdoor business, carried on at sawhorses under trees. The high incidence of death from AIDS accounted for the coffin-making.

Indians had been officially hectoring in the sixties. The first president, Hastings Banda, had come to Karonga in 1965 and singled them out, berated them, accusing Indian traders of taking advantage of Africans. 'Africans should be running these businesses!' he howled. But many of the Indians stayed. In the 1970s the president returned to Karonga

and denounced the Indians again. This time the Indians got the message – nearly all left, and those few who hesitated saw their shops burned down by Banda's Israeli-trained Young Pioneers. Eventually, all the Indians left Karonga for the cities in the south, or emigrated. Banda had gone to other rural towns and given the same speech, provoking the same result.

The shock to me was not that all the Indians were gone but that no one had come to take their place; that the shops were in ruins, still with the names of Ismailis and Gujaratis on them. The empty shops and the coffin-makers gave Karonga the look of a city hit by plague, which in a sense was just what had happened.

At Karonga's main market, I found a minibus going south and jammed myself in with twenty-one others, adults and children, steaming, aromatic. And when the driver began to go much too fast I wondered once again: Why am I risking my life in an overcrowded and unsafe jalopy being driven by an incompetent boy?

The answer was simple: There was no other way. I could have flown, of course. There was an airstrip in Karonga and a weekly plane, but that was for missionaries and politicians and agents of virtue, and the tourists who wanted to parachute into Karonga to see the lake.

Yet I promised myself on the road out of Karonga that after this African trip I would never take another chicken-bus, minibus or *matatu*, and no more cattle trucks or overcrowded taxis. If I were spared in this journey I would never again put my life in the hands of an idiot driver in a death trap.

The cracked windows were jammed shut, the damp passengers pressed together.

A symphony of smells fuses the mass of huddled human forms. Sour reek of armpits, nozzled oranges, melting breast ointments, mastick water, the breath of suppers of sulphurous garlic, foul phosphorescent farts, opoanax, the frank sweat of marriageable and married womankind, the soapy stink of men.

James Joyce anatomizing the malodorous upper gallery of the opera house in Trieste seemed to prove a common humanity in body odor.

But the strong human reek on African buses was a smell of mortality that seemed to me like a whiff of death.

The bad road was a help to safety, for on most parts of it there was no way to speed. The potholes were so numerous and so deep the driver had to slow down and steer around them, as in an obstacle course; or else he plunged into them, going dumpy-dumpy-dumpy, in and out of the holes, making some of the children on board puke on their chins. The driver went much too fast on the smooth parts of the road, but his speed sent us careering into stretches of mud. Twice we became mired, and some male passengers got out and pushed. Not me. I walked ahead through the mud, with some other older men, until the minibus caught up with us elders.

I walked thinking, What has changed? The road had always been bad. The lakeshore had always been thinly populated by Tumbuka-speaking fishing families in thatched huts, using dugout canoes and nets they spread on bushes to dry. They smoked the little fish, *kapenta*, and the plumper *chambo* on grills made of tree branches. Rice was grown here in lakeside paddy fields that were easily flooded. I saw fishermen and dugouts and drying racks and rice fields and thought, Anyone who had snapped a picture of this lakeside forty years ago would have been able to take the same picture today.

On one of the muddy stretches we passed a small somewhat deformed man, perhaps a dwarf, certainly a hunchback, and the boys in the minibus yelled out the window, mocking him for his deformity.

The hunchback screamed at them, 'You've got trouble!'

'You've got bigger trouble!' one of the boys called out, and everyone laughed.

I had caught the word *mabvuto* – trouble – and the man next to me told me what had been said in Tumbuka. People walking by the road shouted at us so often that I asked the same man why this was so.

He said, 'Because they are forced to walk they are mocking us.'

'And you mock them, too.'

'Just to make a joke.'

The Malawi joke, shouted from the bus, was: *Keep walking, sucker!*

The lake was beautiful, there were golden mountains on the Mozambican side, and on ours the escarpment leading to the Nyika Plateau,

glittering water and great heights and the natural beauty of Africa. That was half the story. The other half was this miserable bus and the stinking hostile boys in it mocking the heavily laden women and the deformed man.

We came to Chilumba, just a fishing village, where a man was frying cut-up potatoes in fat. The potatoes were crusted lumps, the fat looked like motor oil. I bought some and ate them while we waited for passengers and, still hungry, ate a couple of bananas.

We climbed the escarpment on a treacherous road of hairpin bends, many of them with hastily – and badly – cleared landslides, past some disused coalmines, to the escarpment and the settlement of Livingstonia, the earliest mission in the country. The mission had once been a brick church and bungalows, a hospital and huts, a high cool place where expats could grow Brussels sprouts and chrysanthemums. Now it sprawled more, and had lost many trees, the school looked neglected, but it was much the same as it had been.

And beyond Livingstonia the plateau rolled on, green, unpeopled. We stopped often, because a minibus made its greatest profit by traveling overstuffed, picking up whoever signaled for it to stop, and all their produce and livestock. And when I thought the sorry vehicle could not take any more passengers, the ticket taker slid the door aside and hung on, as the bus sped with the door open, some passengers hanging out.

The towns of Rumphu and Ekwendeni – places I had once known pretty well – had also lost their Indian shops and not replaced them with African ones. This interested me; the ruined and abandoned shops, with faint painted signs saying *Patel Bros* and *Bombay Bazaar* and *Alibhai Merchandise Mart* – all of them derelict, the roofs caved in, the windows broken, many of them vandalized with graffiti. In front of them, on the grass verge by the storm drain and the roadside ditch were African women, displaying soap and salt and matches and cooking oil on a small square of cloth. The commercial life of these towns in the Northern Province had declined from main streets of busy shops to simple open-air markets of hawkers and fruit sellers sitting in the mud.

Six hours after leaving Karonga we came to the town of Mzuzu, at

the edge of the Viphyia Plateau. I knew some people here, so I decided to stay in a hotel and look them up. The person I most wanted to see was Margaret, the widow of one of my first friends in Malawi, Sir Martin Roseveare.

On his retirement from the British Civil Service in 1962, Sir Martin had come to Nyasaland to run a teachers' college. He was a good-humored pipe-smoking gentleman who in his late sixties was a hearty field hockey player. But he was also a stickler for detail. The frugality that the war had imposed on British people had made many of them misers and cheese-parers, but had inspired others with incomparable ingenuity, turning them into inventors and self-helpers. Wartime deprivation had brought out Sir Martin's resourcefulness. He first devised the fraud-proof ration book, and was awarded a knighthood for his effort. But he also took an interest in education, in gardening, and sports. These enthusiasms he carried to Malawi. And he was of the old breed, an educator, not an evangelist, someone who had come to Africa to serve, to call it home, and to die in the bush.

His wife, Lady Margaret, was the same, sporty, intelligent, and resourceful, able to mend the water-driven stirrup pump that generated their electricity. I sometimes would see her bent over a greasy machine – tweed skirt, hair in a bun, argyle socks and muddy sandals – waving a socket wrench and saying, 'Crikey!'

Sir Martin had died in his nineties, Lady Margaret lived on, and in her widowhood she ran Viphyia Secondary School. I had always seen these people as admirable, even as role models, vigorous retirees I might emulate in my own later years. They gave me the ambition, one I nursed for a long time, of returning to Africa, perhaps in my mid-sixties, and doing as they had done. Of course, I would go on writing, but I would justify my presence in this country by starting a school, or whipping a school into shape. To devote the rest of my life into seeing my self-financed school producing bright well-educated students seemed perfect. I did not intend a deliberate martyrdom or even much of a sacrifice, for I liked the remoteness, the vegetable growing, the rusticity, the Tolstoyan pedagogy. Living in this positive purposeful way would be so healthy as to be life lengthening. I would be a pink-cheeked bore in baggy shorts, doing some writing, a

beekeeper in the *bundu*, running a school of overachievers, imagining the gossip.

Whatever happened to Paul?

He's somewhere in Central Africa. Just upped and left. Been there for years.

'Lady Margaret, she is dead,' a girl told me at the school – and the school was looking run-down in a way that would not have pleased its scrupulous late headmistress.

She had passed away two years before, at the age of eighty-seven.

'Where is she buried?'

The girl shrugged – no idea. The Roseveares were not proselytizers but they were churchgoers, so I went to the Anglican church in Mzuzu and asked the African vicar if he had known them. 'Vicar-General,' he said, correcting me. Yes, he had known them. They were wonderful, he said. They had helped build the church. They were buried right here.

Their graves were rectangular slabs set side by side in the muddy churchyard, Lady Margaret's unmarked, Sir Martin's inscribed, *Beloved by All*. The graves were overgrown with weeds and looked not just neglected but forgotten. As serious gardeners, haters of disorder, they would have been dismayed at the sight of this tangle of weeds. And so I knelt and as a form of veneration, weeded their graves for old times' sake.

Later, walking through Mzuzu to my hotel I stopped in a bar to drink a beer, but also knowing that inevitably an African would join me and ask me for a drink and tell me a story.

His name was Mkosi. 'We are Angoni, the Zulus from South Africa who came here.'

'So how are things, Mkosi?'

'We are just suffering, sir.'

'And why is that?'

'For myself, sir, my wife is going about with a soldier. I found a letter she wrote to him. It was terrible. "I love you, my dearest darling." I showed her the letter. She cheeked me. "How can I love you? You have no money. I can't love someone who is poor. You are poor."'

'Good riddance to her,' I said.

Two of Mkosi's friends came over looking for free drinks. But I

decided to leave. They followed me outside, wanting to talk. Since there had been obvious prostitutes in the bar I brought up the subject of AIDS. They said that people died all the time in Malawi – how could anyone say for sure the cause was AIDS?

'If you went home with one of those women, would you use a condom?'

One said energetically, with gestures, 'We are Malawians – we like skreen to skreen,' and the others laughed.

'Condoms are rubber,' another said. 'Rubber has so many tiny holes in it. The germs can go through it, and even air, it can go through.'

There was a taxi parked at the curb.

'If rubber leaks why isn't that tire flat?' I said.

They hung around arguing, and talking about the upcoming tobacco auctions, but when they saw that I was not going to give them any money they drifted away.

The next day I looked for a vehicle going south. There were many vehicles in Mzuzu, the most expensive of them of course were the white four-wheel drives displaying the doorside logos of charities, every one that I had ever heard of and some new ones – People to People, Mission Against Ignorance and Poverty, The Food Project, Action Aid, Poverty Crusade, and more.

I was not surprised when they refused to give me a lift – I knew from experience that they were the last people to offer travelers assistance. Still, I was annoyed. I analyzed my annoyance. It was that the vehicles were often driven by Africans, the white people riding as passengers in what resembled ministerial seats. They had CD players, usually with music playing loudly, and now and then I saw the whole deal: an African or a white person driving one-handed in his white Save the Children vehicle, talking on a cell phone with music playing – the happiest person in the country. For every agent of virtue I saw slogging his or her guts out in the field, I saw two of them joy-riding.

This visible bliss on wheels, courtesy of the First World saps who had been guilt-tripped out of their money, was only one of my objections, and the pettiest. A more substantial one was the notion that after decades of charitable diligence, there were more charities in Malawi than ever: Charities and agents of virtue and NGOs were now

part of the Malawi economy, certainly one of the larger parts. The charities in Malawi were troughs into which most people were unsuccessfully trying to insert their snouts. It did not surprise me later to learn that the hotshots who doled out aid in some African countries demanded sex from famine victims in return for the food parcels.

Some minibuses were going to Lilongwe but they looked dangerous – overcrowded, bald tires, doors mended with bailing wire, people riding on the roof, drivers with glazed ganja eyes. I looked for something a bit bigger and safer, but saw nothing – only deathtraps and the superb Land Rovers of the charities. 'Maybe there's a big bus this afternoon.'

I went back to the hotel and reflected on my recent weeks. I had been three days on the bush train from Mwanza, abused by the immigration people in Dar es Salaam, bewildered by the dreadful train to Mbeya, a filthy town where I had been overcharged at the hotel and cheated out of my bus fare; delayed by a bus that didn't show up. Then the struggle to the border, and there had been the punks who had tried to shake me down there, and the health officer who wanted a bribe, before the nighttime trip through the roadblocks to Karonga, and at last the long slow ride across the plateau to here, drizzily Mzuzu.

But I was within striking distance of the capital, Lilongwe. Knowing that I would be arriving there in the next few days I decided to call the US Embassy in Lilongwe. I had volunteered to give lectures anytime, anywhere, to talk to students, to be a Peace Corps helper all over again. My good-will message had been sent to Lilongwe, or so I hoped.

I called the embassy's Public Affairs Office from my hotel in Mzuzu and was surprised to be greeted by a gloomy somewhat impatient woman, saying, 'Yes, yes, I know who you are. The emails came a few weeks ago.'

'About those lectures,' I said.

Cutting me off, in fact snapping at me, the officer said, 'I haven't arranged anything for you.'

'Nothing?'

'You wouldn't believe the week I had,' she said.

Had she, like me, been abused, delayed, terrified, stranded, harassed, cheated, bitten, flooded, insulted, exhausted, robbed, lied to, brow-beaten, poisoned, stunk up and starved?

To avoid howling at her, I put the phone down. I was discouraged at first, for she had only a lazy reply to my offer of help. But then in a kinder moment I thought: in a culture where foreigners constantly showed up and offered themselves, their time, and even material help, charity was nothing special – in fact in Malawi it was another necessitous routine, not philanthropic but a permanent drip-feed, part of a system of handouts.

Who was I in offering to teach or give lectures but just another agent of virtue being reminded by a harassed official that she was far busier than me. Overpaid, officious, disingenuous, blame-shifting and off-hand as she was, this embassy hack was also probably right, saying, 'Take a number, sonny. Get in line. There's plenty of people like you.'

Morning on the Vipha Plateau: drizzling rain, blackish trees in heavy fog, slick muddy roads, Africans tugging plastic bags on their heads to keep dry. At 6:30 in the street outside the Mzuzu bus terminal, sheltered by the twig roof of a banana stand, balancing on a boulder to keep her feet dry was a white woman of about sixty, very thin, very pale in the darkness of the wet morning, searching wide-eyed through the mountain mist for the Lilongwe bus.

She boarded it and we sat side by side at the front, the rain slopping on the front window as we crossed the plateau. The bus was old but it was wide enough and high enough to impart a sense of safety. Every passenger had a seat, the driver was a cautious middle-aged man, and he used his brakes and his directional signals.

The woman beside me was Una Brownly, a nurse from Livingstonia Mission. She and her husband, Don, had been in Africa for twenty-seven years. Don, a doctor, was staying behind at the mission because of the large volume of patients. Una had two weeks' home leave. She had taken the bus from Livingstonia the day before – all day to Mzuzu. A night in a dirty hotel in Mzuzu. Another bus today – all day to Lilongwe. A day in Lilongwe to wait for the London flight. It would take another day for her to get home to Ulster, a four-day trip to have a week at home, before turning around and taking the reverse sequence of planes and buses. A plane from Mzuzu and a connecting flight to London were out of the question – too expensive. Una was not being

funded by an international NGO – no white Land-Rover, no mobile phone, no CD player. She and her husband were medical missionaries, living on money collected by her church back home. They were not well paid, not even by Malawian standards. Many African doctors had been asked to work in Livingstonia; they knew the long history of the hospital and the dire need for medical officers. They all turned the job down.

'There isn't a surgeon north of Lilongwe,' she said.

Forty years after independence, and still the entire northern half of the country lacked a surgeon to perform the more complex operations that her husband was not trained for.

'The government doesn't pay its doctors enough,' she said. 'They leave the country and go where the pay is better.'

'What about your pay?'

She said, 'African doctors don't work for what we're paid.'

I began to understand the futility of charity in Africa. It was generally fuelled by the best of motives, but its worst aspect was that it was non-inspirational. Aliens had been helping for so long and were so deeply entrenched that Africans lost interest – if indeed they had ever had it – in doing the same sort of work themselves. Not only was there no spirit of volunteerism, there was not even a remote desire to replace aid workers in paying jobs. Yet many Africans were unemployed, doing nothing but sitting under trees.

'Does the Malawi government help fund your hospitals?'

'Not at all. They don't even run their own hospitals.'

'How did things get this bad?'

'I don't know,' she said. 'There's corruption, of course. All the ministers want a cut of whatever aid is given. But I don't think about politics – what's the point? And there's lots of aid. Some people think that's the problem. There are some doctors here – Elspeth and Michael King – who wrote a book arguing that Africa is backward because of aid.'

'What do you think?'

My soliciting her opinion on this subject seemed to amuse her, for it is a characteristic of the long-term expatriate health workers in Africa that they do their jobs without complaint or cynicism. Anyone

preoccupied with the contradictions and the daily repetition of the myth of Sisyphus would find such work intolerable, and complaints just tedious if not demoralizing.

'There's always strings attached to aid,' she said. 'That's no bad thing, but in many cases there's no local input. The donor determines what is needed and so the local people adapt their project to get the money.'

Cross-purposes was the kindest interpretation, scamming the more brutal one. I asked, 'Why are the roads in the north so bad?'

'That escarpment road is a hundred years old. It has been beautiful, but did you see all the landslides?' she said. 'In the past they cleared the landslides manually – it took a lot of people, but labor is cheap. And doing it by hand kept the storm drains open. For the past few years they've been using donor bulldozers to clear the rock slides. They bulldoze them to the side, blocking the drains. So when the rain comes it washes the road away and creates a torrent – another landslide.'

So the solution of donor bulldozers had made the problem worse and put many manual laborers out of work.

'The government had been paying five men to maintain the road. Then they stopped paying them. The road has been deteriorating ever since.'

'The school in Livingstonia looked in pretty poor shape,' I said.

'They need twenty-four teachers to run it. There are only fourteen at the school. The English chap is leaving, so in a month they will only have thirteen teachers for about six hundred students. Teachers' salaries are so low, you see.'

I said, 'I'm wondering why a foreign teacher should go to Livingstonia to teach if Malawians are not willing to make the sacrifice.'

With the sweetest smile she dismissed the question as much too logical.

'What sort of vehicle do you have at Livingstonia?' I asked, thinking of the white charity-dispensing Land-Rovers I saw everywhere.

'An ambulance, but it's nine years old and it's off the road at the moment for repairs,' she said. 'Rather a sad story, I'm afraid. We were in Lilongwe a month ago buying parts for it, and tools, and a roll of

material for school uniforms. We had tied them very securely in the back of a pick-up truck, but just as we got in and started to pull away some boys jumped on the truck and cut the ropes and stole everything.'

There was theft and vandalism everywhere, she said. A boy in Lilongwe had yanked a gold chain from her neck. She had shouted 'Thief! Thief!' but men sitting in cars nearby just watched as the boy ran away. The Livingstonia boat was damaged by vandals, and so the two clinics on the lakeshore that could be reached only by water were out of luck.

'My husband's very good at fixing things, though.' When he wasn't operating on patients, Don was patching boats and repairing motors. And it turned out that he had known those two other do-it-yourselfers, the Rosevears.

We talked about AIDS. Una said, 'There must be a great deal in the country because we're seeing many cases, and we're in a very rural area.' Hospital workers themselves were infected, two of the Livingstonia clinical workers were HIV positive.*

'We have no means to treat AIDS patients – no medicines. They die at home. We had a man who had a severe hernia. We operated on him but he didn't improve. We tested him. He was positive. He went home and died.'

'Why do so many people have AIDS here? Is it just because they don't use condoms?'

'I asked that question some years ago,' she said. 'There has to be blood-to-blood contact, but many Africans have had the other STDs, and it's those that create the possibility of infection. But we see so many other ailments. Lots of malnourished children. Lots of anemia. It's the malaria – it destroys the red blood cells.'

We had crossed the forest of the plateau, the dense pinewoods that had been planted fifty or sixty years before as a source of paper pulp. But the scheme hadn't worked – too costly to transport the logs, too expensive to manage – and so the trees were being cut down for fuel

* In January 2002 the WHO reported that 60 percent of the patients in Malawian hospitals suffered from AIDS, and that as a result of the AIDS epidemic there were 2 million orphans in Malawi.

and charcoal. Once through the forest we came to the moorland and the outposts of the plateau, sodden and isolated villages, huts with roofs of black rotted thatch. Then we descended through the rain and mist to flatter land, great stretches with the bouldery hills I had seen in Tanzania and Kenya – Rift Valley features, the remnants of the age of vulcanism. Some egg-shaped boulders were the size of small mountains.

At Mzimba where we stopped to refuel I looked around the market. There was hardly anything to eat for sale, some dirt-caked roots and wilted greens.

'It's the time of year,' Una said. 'The crops aren't ready. Last season's food's been eaten. And, you know, children in Africa aren't a priority. We see children in very advanced stages of malnutrition – bellies distended, skin peeling off. Some of the children are dead by the time they get to us.'

Since this mission nurse of long experience was such a fund of information, I asked her about simple hygiene. Why were buses and *matatus* and enclosed places so much smellier than they had seemed long ago? Was I more fastidious now as an older fussier man? Asking her this, I struck a nerve.

'Oh, the smell!' she said. 'In church when they are all together – the smell in church!' She shut her eyes and smiled in horror. 'But you see there is no hot water for washing. And they don't wash sick people – they think it's bad for the patient, that washing will make them cold and more ill.'

At Kasungu we stopped for passengers and I got out to stretch my legs. The rain was coming down so hard I had to shelter inside the depot, where I complained about the rain.

'That is because you are a European,' said an African in the garage where I was sheltering, looking out at the downpour. 'I am an African. We like rain. We don't like the sun as Europeans do. Europeans lie down in the sun almost naked. Africans – do you ever see them do that? Eh! No! The sun makes us hot. But the rain is good. It gives us a good temperature. It makes the crops grow. Unfortunately now we have floods and the maize cobs are rotting in the fields.'

This seemed to me a pretty fair assessment of cultural difference.

Back on the bus I said to Una, 'It's such an uphill battle. Do you ever ask yourself, "What's the point?"'

'We do what we can,' she said. 'And you know that Livingstonia is very beautiful. The lake is lovely. The people have good hearts.'

'But so little has changed. This is practically the same country I left thirty-five years ago. Maybe worse. The government doesn't even care enough to help you.'

This was too broad a subject. She said with what seemed like hesitation but something that was actually a statement of fortitude, 'It's – just – light a little candle.'

We passed grass huts, smallholdings of tobacco, some of them being harvested, soggy fields. Not much traffic, though many ragged people marching down the road.

'My husband is sixty-four. He's going to retire sometime soon. The government has no plan to replace him. They probably won't send anyone.' She looked grim, saying this. 'If we're not here, there'll be no one.'

'What'll happen then?'

'They'll die,' she said softly. 'They'll just die.'

We were in open country, nothing in the distance but bush, and clouds pressing on the horizon, everything green. I had been nagging about the problems, but Una the optimist had reminded me that Livingstonia was lovely; and this sloping bush was lovely, too – empty Africa, green from the long rains.

But she was pondering her absence, because after a lengthy pause she spoke again, 'That's what happened before. They just died.'

She went back to watching the road ahead, for we had entered the outer villages of Lilongwe district, the tumbled huts, some mud-walled, others just shacks. I admired this woman, for her humility especially. One of her greatest virtues was that she was unaware of how virtuous she was. She had not uttered a single word of sanctimony. She had no idea that I was a writer. Her sympathy was tempered by realism, yet she had not complained of her fate. No Malawian nurse or doctor would have gone near this public bus, nor taken the three-day road trip from Livingstonia to Lilongwe.

Medical and teaching skills were not lacking in Africa, even in

distressed countries like Malawi. But the will to use them was often non-existent. The question was, should outsiders go on doing jobs and taking risks that Africans refused?

I decided to stay in Lilongwe for a week before heading farther south. I needed a rest from my incessant travel and I had to remind my family that I was still alive. I chose a hotel on the main street. Third World luxury resorts are one aberration – Malawi even had a few on the lake. But Third World hotels are another, just as awful, because they get the economists and the UN people and the refugee experts and the heads of charities and the visiting opportunists and politicians. Malawi had the worst and most expensive hotels I encountered on my whole trip, and all charged two daily rates – a low one for Africans, an exorbitant one for foreigners. They were most of them state-owned hotels, run by South African management companies.

'What is this?' I said at the Lilongwe Hotel, pointing to a 10 percent addition on a hotel bill.

'Service charge.'

'Where is the service? There is no one to carry bags, no one sweeps the floors, the room isn't clean, the toilet is broken. You know what I mean? No service, so why the charge?'

'It is the name. "Service charge." Ten percent, plus-plus.'

The charities and foreign donors had had a questionable effect on the poverty and misery in the country, but they were positively destructive when it came to hotels, because they were expensive – accounts for whom money was no object. Those of us who were budget-conscious and aimless wanderers were punished for their profligacy. But I stayed at the bad expensive hotel; I had no choice. Lying in bed there I rehearsed the writing of this paragraph, and during the day in the week I spent in Lilongwe I busied myself writing my erotic novella.

Lilongwe was two towns. One was the old market town of shops and gas stations and crowds of idle ragged boys; the other was the adjacent much newer town, the nation's capital, of wide streets, government offices, the presidential palace, official residences, missions and embassies. Soldiers and policemen stood guard all over the

streets of the capital, but in slummy Lilongwe Old Town everyone complained of crime, especially the Indian shopkeepers.

Chased from the rural areas by Hastings Banda's party thugs, Indians had come to old commercial Lilongwe where life was safer and they were for a time lost in the shuffle. One feature of Banda's dictatorial rule was that political violence was common, but that civilian crime – car theft, burglary, rape, murder – was comparatively rare. This had changed, in fact reversed – rape and murder were now more common than political terror.

Banda was gone now, after thirty-four years in power, and his name had been removed from the national stadium and the roads and schools and hospitals. Under the new president, Bakili Muluzi, the man who had put his chubby face on the money, the streets were unsafe and house break-ins were frequent. Muluzi had been seen as a populist, the anti-Banda; now he was turning into a despot. As a Muslim in a mostly Christian country, one of his most ardent foreign supporters was the Libyan government of Muammar Ghaddafi. The Malawian proverb explaining someone like Muluzi was, 'Raise a python and he will swallow you.'

'We could sleep at night in our homes before,' a man named Salim told me. He ran a restaurant. He had joined me at a table while I ate one of his samosas. 'We can't feel safe now. Not now. There are thieves!'

'I used to live here,' I said.

'What do you think?' he said, challenging me.

'You tell me, Salim.'

'It is worse, worse, worse. And not getting better. Getting much worse!'

But, being watchful, I walked the streets of Lilongwe, explored the market – an enormous emporium of second-hand clothes, here as elsewhere being retailed by hustlers who had gotten them free from charities. There was so little traffic that Africans habitually walked in the middle of the street. I was warned by Indians of theft, but I was poorly dressed and though I had valuables in my bag (cash, passport, artifacts) I carried nothing that was worth stealing. Most of my clothes had come from second-hand markets like this.

Even the prostitutes avoided me, unless I bought them drinks, which I did out of pure loneliness, like one of those geezers you see on back streets at odd hours feeding stray cats, a displacement activity this much resembled. All the talk of AIDS kept me detumescent. Usually, I sat alone under the trees at the bar next to the Hotel Lilongwe. Sometimes I joined a table of loitering girls and talked to them. They were nicely dressed and even demure.

'We are schoolgirls. We are all cousins.'

'I am studying secretarial.'

'Myself, I am studying business.'

'Me, I am working for the Anything Goes shop.'

They were in their mid- and late teens, not married, no children, and didn't drink beer, only soft drinks. They giggled and murmured and meowed, they told me about themselves, asked me questions, teased me.

'You are not old – what? – forty or forty-five.'

'Have another Coke, dear!'

There were Christmas lights tangled in the tree branches, the music was mellow, the place was not rowdy. For an abused traveler who had been catching buses and trucks and trains through the whole of the Great Rift Valley, from Ethiopia to Malawi, it was a novelty and a pleasure just to stay in one place and eat regular meals, take baths, have my laundry done, hold meaningless conversations, write my story, and do the *New York Times* crossword, faxed from home.

'What are you doing, Mr Paul?'

'Just a puzzle. Filling in words. Ah, the clue is "Forbidden tea."'

They leaned over, smelling of perfume and face powder and hair oil, the bodices of their crunchy dresses like prom gowns of my youth, pressed against me.

'I guess that's "taboo oolong." It fits.'

When I had finished and was tucking the folded puzzle into my pocket, one of the girls would lean over and whisper with warm breaths, her lips grazing my ear, 'I want to give you a massage, Mr Paul. Please take me. I am good.'

But I went chastely to my room and lay there alone on my damp

mildewed bed staring at the stains like faces on the ceiling and thought: What went wrong here?

The newspapers still ran headlines such as 'A New Journey from Poverty to Prosperity' (reporting a speech by the Minister of Agriculture) and 'Fresh Start in the Ag Sector' (American-funded scheme for tobacco farmers to switch to growing pigeon peas and soy beans) and 'Tobacco Auction Projections Raise Hopes' (but a week later the auction prices were a fifth of what they had been the year before). I thought: What gives?

Still smarting from having been rebuffed as a volunteer speaker, I asked to see the American ambassador. The usual form in a book such as this, answering the question of attribution, was to describe this man as 'informed sources' or a 'high-level Western diplomat' or 'someone I happened to meet.' But the meeting was so brief and so anodyne it needs no camouflage, and his being a diplomat made me smile, as I was talking with him.

I had the impression the ambassador did not like me any more than the embassy woman, apparently his ally, who had said *You wouldn't believe the week I had*. He was about my age, rather benign on the whole but visibly seeming to suppress a mood of fuss and fret. Was it my faded American thrift-shop clothes from the African market? More likely it was my wild-eyed frustration, my reckless criticism, my incautious gibes, but I was road weary from my dark star safari, and Africa's fortunes had become my obsessive subject. In other countries I was a detached observer, but absurd as it seemed, I took the Malawian situation personally.

I said, 'I used to teach here. I know the country pretty well. I even speak the local language. I offered to give some lectures here but your Public Affairs Officer wasn't interested and didn't do anything to help me.'

The ambassador was not provoked.

I said, 'I suppose you get lots of offers like that.'

The ambassador sipped his drink and pushed a saucer of peanuts at me as though to mollify me.

I said, 'Nothing has *improved* in this country, for goodness sake. I mean, name one thing.'

The ambassador said, 'There is no political terror. There was before.'
I said, 'I've been frisked and delayed at twenty roadblocks from Karonga to here.'

The ambassador said, 'I'm planning to make a trip to the north.'
I said, 'The roads are terrible. We had to push the bus.'
The ambassador said, 'The roads are much better than they were.'
I yawned and rounded my arm and wagged some peanuts in my hand.

The ambassador said, 'My last post was the Congo. In the Congo there aren't any roads.'

I said, 'What good are roads if there are no motor vehicles?'

The ambassador said, 'There are buses.'

I said, 'Ever take one?' But that was such a low blow, I added, 'And tobacco is the cash crop. Tobacco!'

The ambassador said, 'Tobacco can now be grown by smallholders. It was a government monopoly before.'

I said, 'It's a declining commodity.'

The ambassador said, 'Coffee production is increasing.'

I said, 'The price is down. Coffee is another money loser.'

The ambassador said, 'This is all anecdotal of course. But I feel some changes for the better are in the air.'

I said, 'Well, as a diplomat you're paid to be an optimist.'

The ambassador scowled into his drink for my presumptuous remark. He did not like that imputation at all.

I said, 'Honestly, I am really depressed here. Nothing works, the schools are awful, the infant mortality rate is still the highest in the world. I think the government wants to have bad schools, because ignorant people are easier to govern.'

The ambassador said, 'The government is committed to improving the schools. But teachers are poorly paid.'

I said, 'So what? No one ever became a teacher to get rich.'

The ambassador said, 'And there are some exciting new developments in telecommunications in Malawi. Cell phone technology. Next year perhaps.'

His ghastrly credulous phrase 'next year' made me laugh as much as his mention of cell phones. 'We hope by this time next year', Mrs

Jellyby says of her African Project for the natives of Borrioboola-Gha, and Dickens is making satire of the phrase. But the ambassador bore a greater resemblance to Mrs Jellyby's fellow philanthropist, Mr Quale ('with large shining knobs for temples'), whose project was 'for teaching the coffee colonists to teach the natives to turn piano-forte legs and establish an export trade.' Make-work schemes and cottage industries started by the present-day Jellybys and Quales were common in Africa. What had seemed an insanely mocking idea to Charles Dickens 150 years ago was considered a solemn hope for Malawi now.

I said, 'Ha! Cell phones! They'll play with them like people in a cargo cult! They'll treat them like toys!'

A bald man can express frustration with his entire head. My friskiness tried the ambassador's patience, but even with his scalp creased with anger he remained polite and positive. I had to admire his equanimity, yet I could see he was dying for me to leave. He did not refill my glass. This is an effective suggestion that one's time is up. When it was conveyed to me through meaningful silences that the meeting was over, we strolled through his garden, admiring his palm trees, and off I went, back to my hotel room to brood.

The next day I called the president of the University of Malawi, a man I knew – he had been a fellow teacher, long ago. He said he was glad to hear from me.

'I'm just passing through,' I said. I did not mention my birthday promise to myself – to spend a week or so teaching, helping out, doing something useful. 'I want to offer my services – give a lecture at the university or do some teaching at Soche Hill.'

'That's excellent. Come to Zomba – I'll arrange something. And welcome home, *achimwene*.'

Achimwene was the fondest word for brother.